

Skerne Wetlands Field Trip u3a Wild Things June 2025

This superb YWT site feels like a secret. It's unsignposted down a bumpy track, and we were almost alone as we explored its 110 acres of wet grassland, chalk stream and ponds from the former trout farm. Barbel lazily swam through the clear waters of the headwaters of the River Hull, damselfly and mayflies flitted around, Whitethroats and Willow Warblers sang along with Sedge and Reed Warblers, while a Marsh Harrier silently quartered the reedbeds. The noisiest and almost constant soundtrack was the raucous cackling of male Marsh Frogs, sounding more like angry ducks than amphibians.



Marsh frogs are an invasive species, introduced only in 1935, and are Europe's largest frog. It's an offence to release them into the wild as they can eat or outcompete other smaller species. They're very competitive in the mating stakes as you can see in John's picture above. They certainly kept us entertained and they were very easy to watch in the old brackish ponds left from the trout farm occupation of the site.

The headwaters of the River Hull are an invaluable habitat and the most northerly chalk streams in the UK. They are the home of Water Voles and Water Shrews. We didn't spot these elusive creatures today but we saw the latrine platforms put out by YWT to monitor their presence and their holes on the river bank were there, just on the waterline, so they can escape their many predators from both above and below, such as heron, pike and weasel.



David pictured these Barbel, males probably fertilising eggs released by the larger female on the clear gravel banks.



This is a Common (or Green Drake) Mayfly imago (adult), the commonest species here. The adults are very short-lived, and cannot eat, existing to mate and then die after spending up to two years as nymphs underwater. Mayflies are very primitive insects, 100 million years older than the dinosaurs, and the only insects still to have two adult stages, the sub-imago and the imago. I think the picture overleaf is the exuvium, the shed skin of a sub-imago before its final adult stage.



Left: a Four-spotted Chaser dragonfly sits on a twig on one of the ponds.



All the Odonata (the insect order of dragonflies and damselflies) are fierce predators, with a very high success rate. They can fly backwards and have huge eyes.



Not quite sure what's going on in John's picture on the left. There's certainly a tatty spider web and at least two damselfies and the corpse of what looks like an Alder Fly. Are they all spider prey or were the damselfies eating the remains of the fly before getting caught themselves?

What is certainly going on in John's picture below is ovipositing. The male damsels (probably Azure) are holding females in mate-guarding behaviour while they lay their eggs on reed stems just below the surface. They can often be seen flying 'in tandem' like this to ensure other males don't muscle in on their females.





Among the most stunning damselflies we saw were the large Banded Demoiselles, which are often seen in summer on the banks of the River Hull. Above is the gorgeous male with the banded wings, and left the equally iridescent female, green and with plain wings. Demoiselles fly in a different way to the other damselflies, fluttering their wings like butterflies.



Above: Blood Vein Moth;



Left: Golden-bloomed Grey Longhorn Beetle.

P 7: female Orange Tip;

Mute Swans on the River Hull.

Page 8: one of the Nettle Weevils;

A ball of Garden Spiderlings on Nettles.





Report HK

Photos by David, John,
Helen and Phil.